

# Eau de Vie

a wine, spirits, and travel newsletter

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## THE JANUARY NEW YEAR.

If you cast your mind over the last year you'll see lots of strange and terrifying things happen. There is the pandemic, the election, and all of life's perturbances in both the big and small ways.

But if you cast your mind's eye back to New Year's Eve 1999 you'll see a different sort of anxiety. There were those among us who believed that since computers couldn't discern the flipping of the century, our entire world would come to a technological screeching halt!

Of course it didn't, and I wasn't one of the preppers, but it did make me wonder about the calendar and why we turn the New Year over in January. Why not sometime in spring when life returns to our frozen lands?

As usual, the blame lies somewhere in the mists of time, with our societal and cultural fore-bearers, the Romans.

Rome wasn't always an empire. Back in 700BC Rome was just a collection of villages on hill tops and it was ruled by kings. Those kings set up a calendar based on the moon. They used a "precise" 304 day calendar of 10 months. The year started in March, with the Spring Equinox and this heralded the start of the Roman campaigning (fighting, warring, conquering)

season. March is named after the Roman god of war, Mars, and the rest of the year followed along for 9 more months. This left 60 or so days at the end of the year and those days were just called winter. I must admit, January and February do feel like that.

Rome's original calendar was Lunar which meant it followed the phases of the moon. But lunar calendars suffer from imprecision because the earth orbits the sun and that orbit takes 365.25 days. The moon goes around the earth and that orbit has nothing to do with Earth's orbit around the sun so basing your calendar on the lunar cycle means many of your holidays will never be on the same day. Instead, they'll drift about in time and the seasons. For lunar calendars this means coming up with a system to fix the inaccuracies of the year. For the Romans, since the end of the year was already imprecise who cared? You can imagine the conversation: "Just chop off a few days or add a few, just make it work Septimus!"

When Rome became a republic in 509BC, and swore to never again have a king, the need of a more official end of the year was recognized. This was because in the new year, new consuls would be elected and take office. Knowing when this was to happen suddenly took on real purpose. These last

two months were called January and February and it was the chief priest's, the *Pontifex Maximus*, job to determine when the year ended.

If that pontiff was your buddy, he could make the year stretch on a bit longer than normal. For example, Julius Caesar was able to extend his third term to a whopping 446 days.

The old ten month calendar is still with us. It is represented in the words of the months. They are most recognizable in Latin based languages. Number 7, September (sept in French), number 8, October (ocho in Spanish), number 9, November (neuf in French and nueve in Spanish), and number 10, December (dix in French and diez in Spanish). But now September is the ninth month and December the twelfth so what happened?

In 154BC, Spanish Gallic tribes, who were being suppressed by the Romans, and understandably unhappy about their plight, were in full rebellion. In response, it was decided to have the consular elections moved two months earlier to give the Roman armies a two month head start on the campaigning season.

You can imagine the conversation, (for maximum effect, read the following with a valley girl accent) "It's such a bother to have to walk to Spain and not get there until it's all, like, really hot! My armor chafes terribly in the heat. How

am I suppose to plunder like this!?” “Hey, Septimus! Let’s move the start of the year up to those winter months, that way we can plunder Spain before it gets all hot.” “Great idea Numa!” And so, in 153BC Numa made January 1st the start of the new consular year and no one has thought to change it for the following 2175 years.

After Julius Caesar made himself dictator for life (otherwise known as a king) he changed the calendar to the solar method. He learned of this method from his Egyptian girlfriend Cleopatra. They have been using the solar method since 4236BC. The new method was called the Julian Calendar and the Roman Senate loved Julius Caesar so much they name July after him. After which some in the Senate murdered him for declaring himself the king. This resulted in a second Roman civil war. Julius’s nephew won the war, made himself the king / emperor and had month number 6, Sextilis, changed to be named after himself - Augustus, August. After which the Roman republic ceased to exist.

I mention all of this because as I’ve been writing, the Coronavirus is still surging and a mob of Americans, inflamed by the president, has stormed our Capitol building and threatened the foundations of our republic. A republic that drew much of its inspiration from ancient Rome. And while we recently acknowledged the turning of a new year, so many things still seem the same.

The turning of the calendar, the flipping of the date, doesn’t really mean anything. These are made

up words and numbers we use to help us count the passage of time. What truly counts is what we do, say and how we act towards each other. The Coronavirus will not simply disappear with sunlight and despite my affection for the sign in my neighborhood that says, “Like a miracle one day he will be gone,” Mr. Trump’s removal from power is not an act from a deity but the result of millions of individual voters exercising their right.

The calendar helps us recall the past and plan for the future. But it is our collective actions that define the outcomes of the date on the page. While we ride out the winter in the midst of a political and viral storm I am hearted by the thought of spring, the start of the original Roman New Year. I am hopeful that spring will bring warmth, healing, growth and renewal. I look forward to welcoming you in person, in sharing food, drink, and travel. Happy New Year, be safe, be kind and remember that spring is coming and with it the promise of change and reasons for optimism.

*\*I do however, think winter is beautiful and take solace in the opportunity it gives for internal reflection. Below is a picture taken this year in our back yard.*



# THE 2021 WINE PAIRING CLUB &

## *Diner en Blanc Duluth*

**Op·ti·mism:** noun

1. hopefulness and confidence about the future or the successful outcome of something
2. *Philosophy* that this world is the best of all possible worlds.
  - the belief that good must ultimately prevail over evil
  - *the belief that eventually we will get back to wine classes and wouldn't it be great if we could do a Diner en Blanc this year?*

Stay patient dear readers. When we can host wine and spirits tasting events again I will inform you here. I’ve spent a good portion of 2020 trying wines to share and buying magnum bottles that need a crowd to open!